

KATHARINE NORTH.

XIV.

MRS. NORTH'S NOTE.

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Again Mrs. North tried to shrink away from her husband, and again she found that she could not do so.

She had heard him say that he pushed Mr. Grove into the water, but she did not believe the statement. It was only a symptom of approaching insanity. Hadn't she seen Colburn jump in after the deacon? Now, if she had been so exceedingly simple as to forget that she was a church member and do such a deed, she shouldn't have changed her mind and undone it.

"How does the affair strike you, Roxy?" Mr. North put this inquiry in the most reckless manner.

He had no fear that his wife would reveal what he had confessed. Still, in his present mood, he cared very little if she should do so.

When Mrs. North felt sure that she had the control of her tongue and lips, she said: "I wish you'd stop the horse, Colburn. I'd just as lives walk the rest of the way."

"You can just as well ride. I'm going right by the house," said Roxy.

"But as lives walk the rest of the way. He continued to drive on.

The woman sank back upon the seat. Her imagination had become so active that she now asked herself if it were likely that Colburn had secreted his razor about him and would suddenly draw it for the purpose of cutting her throat.

This unwelcome exercise of the imagination had the most confusing effect. Mrs. North was even conscious that her heart beat.

"Having pushed him in," now said Mr. North, "and given him a rheumatic fever—did you say 'twas rheumatic?—do you think I'm going to inquire about him? No, I don't feel like it. I've obeyed you tolerably well, Roxy, but I guess I'll draw the line here."

Roxy turned her helpless face deliberately toward her husband.

"But—but you pulled him out," she managed to say.

And she watched North's hands to see if they made any movement toward a hidden razor. She wondered if she could jump over the wheel. She knew she could. She must stay there and have her throat cut from ear to ear. For that was what men did frequently with razors.

Any way, she was glad she had always looked Colburn's violence to suit him.

"Yes, I pulled him out. You see, I wasn't one of these real, genuine, double-dyed villains who can stick to a good thing. He was so devilish provoking—and I kept thinking of Kitty, and how she would be free. And he was close to the edge after we'd landed; and the people crowding round. All at once, it seemed the best chance in the world to straighten things out. I just crowded up with the rest, and I found it easy enough to do. I remembered he couldn't swim. And I was glad of it. Of course, somebody would have pulled him out if I hadn't. But when I saw him in the water, I couldn't stand it. It was too horrible."

Here the man shuddered.

"So I just went after him? But if the wretch is going to be sick and die because he happened to fall into the salt water that day, you see it leaves me with rather of a load on my mind."

Mr. North looked grimly ahead along the road. His wife looked at him. There was silence between the two.

At last Mrs. North began again to smooth her shawl over her knees. Her mind groped after something, she knew not what. She recalled that it was preparatory lecture at their church that evening and she was dimly grateful, although she could not see what bearing a preparatory lecture would have on the fact that her husband had attempted to drown some one and had then rescued that person.

After a while Mrs. North suggested once more that she could walk the rest of the way. But she was really hardly aware that she spoke.

Mr. North's expression softened somewhat as he looked at her and saw the unmistakable signs of bewilderment and suffering.

"It would be just like him to die," he said. Then he laughed and added, "only he'll want to live for the chance of marrying again."

"Colburn," said his wife, "I wish you wouldn't laugh. If he dies you'll be responsible. I hope there won't be any more of this kind of thing."

"There isn't much likelihood of that. If he dies—here a solemn intensity came to the speaker's voice—"I ought to be glad of it. Kitty'll be a free woman, with some hope in the world."

"Colburn," said his wife, "I wish you wouldn't. You frighten me."

But Colburn made no response to this remark. It would require some time for him to adjust his mind to the idea that his wife could be frightened.

When they reached the gate of Deacon Grove's place Mr. North let his wife climb out of the wagon unassisted. He watched her as she walked up the path between the smoke trees. And as he watched he repeated to himself "As long as they both shall live."

Then he drove on without a suspicion that his wife was afraid he had concealed a razor about his person.

Mrs. North found the Feeding Hills doctor selecting something from his medicine chest in the sitting-room. This room already had that peculiar odor of paragon which is so associated with "old school" country physicians.

The doctor paused in the act of touching his tongue to the stopper of a phial.

"Good morning, Mrs. North," he said with extreme cheerfulness. "I hope you've brought your daughter with you, eh? The place for a wife is by her husband's side, eh? And Grove is going to have a serious time, serious time, I fear."

He lifted another phial and smelled of its contents. "Rheumatic fever—long winded, tedious—complications very likely. Better send for your daughter. Of course she'll come now. Girls have whims, but this isn't a time for whims."

He compounded something in a glass which he filled half full of water.

He blew half the liquid with a spoon and sniffed at it. He was so very cheerful as to seem almost out of place in a house where rheumatic fever with complications was present. But if a doctor isn't going to be in the midst of illness, what is he doing there that disposition?

Mrs. North was glad for an opportunity to sit down away from her husband. When she had started away from home she had in mind several different "recipes" of things to do in case of different fevers. Now she could think of nothing.

She took off her gloves and made them into a ball by turning one inside of the other. She thought she would offer to watch, if the sick man had begun to have watchers. But she would have to go home first and arrange for Colburn's meals. And she meant to start out and walk before it was time for her husband to come back. She did not find herself quite able to contemplate sitting beside a man whom she suspected of having a razor about him ready for use on throats.

"Is Mr. Grove?" she inquired.

"Bad, very bad," was the reply with even greater cheerfulness of demeanor. "And he'll be worse before he is better."

"Who's going to nurse him?" she asked.

"Miss Riddle is here for the present."

"You don't mean 'Gusty Riddle'?"

"Yes."

The two looked at each other and the doctor smiled broadly, but he said nothing until after a somewhat long pause.

Then he remarked again that a man's wife ought to be with him.

He gazed keenly at the woman as he said this. He did not try to conceal his curiosity. He, like all the rest of the community, had been greatly interested in Deacon Grove's fourth marriage and in his wife's subsequent action. The whole

affair was an inexhaustible theme for talk all through Feeding Hills.

Nothing had happened since that could serve to take the public mind from that topic.

Mrs. North's face was imperiously stolid. She was not even going to say that a man's wife ought to be with him. She did say, however, that "Gusty Riddle was said to be a most excellent nurse."

The doctor nodded. He knew a great many of the "ins and outs" of nearly all the families for miles around, and he greatly enjoyed that knowledge. But he had never felt that he knew much about this affair of Grove's.

The girl was not like the rest of the girls around there.

He used to attend her in those various attacks of the croup; but when a child is very small, and is struggling with the croup, you cannot judge with any certainty what she will be when she is grown, and is influenced to a distasteful marriage.

Presently the doctor went out of the room with the tumbler of medicine in his hand.

He could be heard going up the stairs which led from the front entry, and then his steps were audible in the room above. In this manner Mrs. North discovered that the deacon was sick in the spare chamber.

After a few moments she rose and went into the kitchen. She heard some one there and she wanted to know if Mr. Grove's old housekeeper was still "doing the work." Besides, the widow Amos Morse might communicate some items of interest. And first of all Roxy wanted to know how "Gusty Riddle" happened to be there.

Mrs. Morse was on her knees with a pail of water and a dish of yellow soap beside her. She said she hoped Miss North would excuse her gittin' up, for when she was down it was hard to git up, 'n' when she was up it was hard to git down; and that she weighed more'n she used to when she was young.

From the size of the Widow Morse all of these assertions were probably strictly true.

She rubbed soap on to her mop and then bent forward to scrub the board in front of her. As she did so she told her visitor to take that chair by the stove where the floor was washed and make herself to home. She explained that there wasn't no standing on ceremony when there was sickness in the house.

Mrs. North sat down. She looked at the clock. Colburn could not be more than half way to the west part of the town now.

As Mrs. Morse was wringing out her mop she said that if a man had a wife it was "usually expected" she'd help take care of her husband when he was sick.

"Mis' Morse," said the visitor, "I done all I could."

"I ain't blamin' nobody in particular," was the response, "only it is generally the case that a wife helps take care of her husband when he's sick. I s'pose your Katharine's havin' a good time to the shore."

Mrs. North could hardly repress a groan; but she did repress it. She answered that she shouldn't think, for her part, that Katharine would have a good time anywhere.

Her anger against the girl was growing daily. And her belief was increasing that all the disagreeable things that had happened since that wedding day were Katharine's fault—even to the pushing of the deacon into the water and the rheumatic fever that now held him in its power.

"Girls are monstrous queer things," said Mrs. Morse.

Mrs. North did not now repress the groan. Then she remarked that she understood from the doctor that "Gusty Riddle" was in the house as nurse. Hadn't "Gusty" got no shame?

The floor washer sat back on her heels with her mop in one hand and her cake of soap in the other. She gazed at the woman in the chair by the stove.

"I ain't dyin' in love with 'Gusty myself,'" she said, "but somebody 'd got to nurse the deacon, and you know very well, Mis' North, that I, with my flesh, 'n' the housework, 'n' the butter to make, couldn't be expected to do it. 'Taint in reason."

"No," taint," responded Mrs. North. "But I should have thought that anybody who'd tried to git Mr. Grove, as everybody knows 'Gusty' tried, would kinder hate to come here like this—now he's married, to. Did he send for her?"

"I d'know exactly how that was; but I reckon that the deacon knew that, since old Miss Newton died, she's been out of a job."

"I bet she'd," said Roxy, with more emphasis than she usually used. "But the deacon ain't a single man now, and he never did take to 'Gusty Riddle."

"He ain't the only man that don't take to her"—here Mrs. Morse chuckled. "But nobody can't say she ain't a good nurse."

"No," acquiesced Mrs. North, "nobody can't say that. Is that her on the stairs?"

She turned her head to listen.

The next moment the door opened and a woman of about forty appeared. The front of her hair was carefully arranged in a curly fluff. The back hair was a faultless "French twist." She had on a light blue print gown with a white ruffle at the throat.

She had almost colorless, extremely prominent eyes, a little nose and a chin inclined to come forward too much. She also had a girlish air. She walked with a kind of skip; she laughed with almost every word she said; then she would catch herself up as if she ought not to give way so much to the habits of youth. She looked good natured.

"'Tis you, ain't it, Mis' North?" she said, as she entered. "I didn't really believe it was, but the deacon he stuck to it you hadn't gone—the doctor said you'd called—and the deacon says he wants to see you 'fore you go."

She laughed gently as she ceased speaking. She announced, with another laugh, that she guessed she'd put on the double boiler 'n' make that custard while there was a fire. The doctor said the deacon might have a custard.

Roxy glanced at the clock again. She reckoned that Colburn had just about reached the west part.

She rose from her chair and said she guessed she'd go right up.

"Gusty," having placed the double boiler over the fire, hastened to lead the way. She turned to say in a whisper that it did seem as if a man's wife ought to be with him when he was sick.

And again Mrs. North replied: "I done the best I could."

"Everybody says you couldn't do no more," 'Gusty' hastened to say consolingly.

Marvellous Grove was lying restlessly in his bed. His head was bound with a handkerchief; his face was crimson.

He floundered his arms out. Miss Riddle carefully tricked them in again, and reminded him of what the doctor had said about a chill.

The man mumbled something which a malicious person might interpret as being that a chill might be damned.

Mrs. North sat in a chair and leaned over him. The deacon glared up at her.

"I want Kate to know about this," he said. "I want you to see that she does know, right away."

Then he flung his arms out again. 'Gusty' advanced and tucked them in.

"Right away," he repeated.

"I'll send a letter to-day," answered Mrs. North. "But don't build nothing on it."

"You tell her she's to blame for this," went on the deacon more excitedly. "If she hadn't done as she has I shouldn't have gone to the shore; and then fallen into the water. It's the least she can do to come here now. I don't ask her to take care of me. She ain't had any experience. But she ought to be here."

He rose on one elbow and repeated his last remark very loudly.

He was gently pushed down on the pillow by 'Gusty,' who again spoke of a chill.

Roxy did not think she could bear to hear him say anything more about falling into the water.

She rose. She said he might depend upon her

doing what she could, but he mustn't build nothing on it.

She almost hurried down the stairs and out of the front door. She walked down the road fearing all the time that she should hear the wheels of Colburn's wagon behind her. And she was composing the letter she would send to her daughter.

Her husband need know nothing about it. She wanted to make the letter as strong as possible.

She almost dared hope that Deacon Grove's sickness was Providential. But when she thought of how it had been brought about she didn't feel so sure of the Providential part of it. But Providence worked in a mysterious way.

This time Mrs. North was moved to act immediately.

Therefore it came to pass that the next afternoon when Mrs. Llandaff received her mail she came to a letter addressed to her which, when she opened it, she found contained a sealed envelope with the word "Katharine" laboriously written upon it.

She knew her sister's writing. It had not changed much since the time when the two sat side by side and struggled beyond slanting marks between two ruled lines.

Mrs. Llandaff raised her eyes and looked at her niece.

The girl was half lying on a couch by the window. She had a book in her hand, but she was not reading. Her face was turned toward that lovely coast line which stretches away along the ocean edge of Colchester.

Even in these few days there was a great difference in Katharine. The expression of the eyes, as if their owner were watching and listening in a more or less harassed manner, was gone. The lines about the lips had changed in some indescribable way. There was an air of freedom and hopefulness.

Mrs. Llandaff was keenly conscious of this change. This consciousness brought with it to her a fuller sense of the joys of life—a fuller sense than she had expected could be hers again.

And now what was the mother writing?

For an instant Roxy's sister felt a temptation to send back that letter without allowing the owner of it to see it. But Mrs. Llandaff's temptations had never been strongly in the line of any kind of underhand proceeding.

"Kitty," she said, "here's something from your mother."

The girl started. Her eyes dilated; a wave of color rose to her forehead and then subsided into pallor.

She had been roused from a vague and exquisite dream which the sky, and the shore, and water, and the presence of her Aunt Kate had called into being.

She rose feeling as if she were suddenly thrust down into blackness.

She took the letter and went back to the window. She hesitated an instant with it in her hand. It was terrible to have such a feeling toward her mother.

Mrs. Llandaff did not look at her; she went into her bedroom, leaving the girl alone. She laid herself down on the bed, and after a little she was lulled by the sound of the waves and the heat, and she fell asleep.

It seemed to her that she had slept a long time when she felt her hand grasped tightly. She heard Katharine saying:

"Aunt Kate, will you wake?"

She opened her eyes and smiled reassuringly at the girl.

"Of course I'll wake; though I haven't been asleep—that is, I have been dreaming. But what is it?" she sat up suddenly. "What has your mother been doing now? Let me see that letter."

But Katharine did not relinquish the letter. Her fingers closed tightly on it.

"Aunt Kate," she said, "I think I shall have to go back."

"Go back where?"

"To Feeding Hills."

Mrs. Llandaff rose from the bed. She seized her niece by the arm and led her to the window.

The girl's face was gray and set. It was so set that the elder woman dropped the arm and drew back a step.

"I see you are going to be perfectly unreasonable," she said. "I tell you I have a mind to lock you up in your room. I thought you had got to be being influenced by your mother."

"It isn't mother."

Katharine leaned against the window-casing. She looked desperate and hopeless, and as her aunt had said, "perfectly unreasonable."

"But it's your mother who has written?"

"Yes."

"He is not that—that widower."

"He is."

Mrs. Llandaff's eyes flashed.

"And your mother is playing upon your conscience. She wants you to go and take care of him. Well, don't. I don't want to go."

The woman flung out one hand dramatically. "You don't think I'd go for Mr. Grove?" cried Katharine.

"For whom, then? Don't you see you mustn't go to Feeding Hills?"

"The girl's hands shut themselves tightly. But she held herself perfectly still.

"It's for father. It's for father," she answered. "Don't you think I'd go for my father?"

"But he can't ask this of you, child. Don't you think I know Colburn North?"

The woman's voice thrilled somewhat in that last sentence. Katharine gazed eagerly at her as if she could almost hope for some solution, some way out of the trouble which had come upon her.

But she knew directly that she could not.

"No," she said. "He doesn't know that mother has written. But it's for him, all the same. Don't you think I'd do a great deal for my father? He has loved me. And let's in trouble. I think I ought to tell what it is. It's—it's something he has done. I would even try to nurse Deacon Grove for father's sake."

"Is that it?"

"No, it's not that. It's that man that you are going to Feeding Hills."

"Don't know. If father wants me to do that—but I must get ready; I ought to take the next boat to Boston."

"Go and get ready then," responded Mrs. Llandaff.

Her manner told that she had given up all idea of trying to restrain her niece.

And she seemed almost to say that Katharine's heart, as she looked at her, gave a great beat of agony.

But the girl controlled herself and walked away. She left the room and walked toward her own room, trying to think what were the trivial things it was necessary for her to do to prepare to go in the next boat. She found it difficult to bring her mind to the subject. She was going to leave her Aunt Kate. That fact weighed upon her so desolately that she could not see much farther.

And her Aunt Kate had somewhat disappointed her; but of course she had trusted Mrs. Llandaff her own endurance. That lady had a thousand interests in life, while she—the girl—oh, what interest in life had she now? Only to help her father if he were in trouble, and he was in trouble on her account.

A strong wind of salt air came rushing down the corridor where she stood. It came from the end which opened broadly upon a balcony overlooking the bay.

Unconsciously she walked toward the balcony. She was thinking, "I will look at the water again. I shall have to go somewhere to earn my living, but of course I shall never come back here any more."

She stepped out on the balcony.

As she did so, Llandaff, who was leaning upon the railing with a telescope in his hand, turned immediately.

He put down the glass hurriedly and took off his cap.

He came close to her with that unconsidered and almost involuntary movement which makes a great deal of a man accustomed to the minute restraints of society.

"Miss North," he exclaimed almost in a whisper, "what has happened to make you sadder so. Oh! don't tell me. I'll look at the water again."

It seemed as if he were going to take her hand, but he did not. He stood for an instant looking toward her.

Katharine's face turned toward him. She knew with a kind of rush of feeling and intense thankfulness his desire to be of use to her.

"Do let me help you," he repeated.

Then he stood upright, conscious that, though no windows opened on the little balcony, some eyes might see them and note his unconventional attitude.

How kind you are! she said in the same half voice he had used in speaking. It was a voice that gave a certain confidential air to the interview, and that made it have a still more decided power in Llandaff's memory.

The young man knew that he ought to resume his usual manner. He was sure that he ought; but how could he resume it with a face like that looking up at him with complete artlessness.

He was at that moment having a certain demonstration that he had never in his life before seen a woman's face without more or less self-consciousness in it. He had not believed it possible that his thoughts went off into a fascinating vagueness.

Katharine drew back a step—"I wanted to look at the water again," she said.

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A GHOUL'S ACCOUNTANT.

THE STORY OF A SULLIVAN COUNTY PRODUCE DEAL.

In a wilderness sunlight is noise. Darkness is a great, tremendous silence, accented by small and distant sounds. The music of the wind in the trees is songs of loneliness, hymns on abandonment, and lays of the absence of things congenial and alive.

Once a campfire lay dying in a fit of temper. A few weak flames struggled cholerically among the burned-out logs. Beneath, a mass of angry, red coals glowed and hated the world. Some hemlocks sighed and sang and a wind purled in the grass. The moon was looking through the locked branches at four imperturbable bundles of blankets which lay near the agonized campfire. The fire groaned in its last throes, but the bundles made no sign.

Off in the gloomy unknown a foot fell upon a twig. The laurel leaves shivered at the stealthy passing of deers. A moment later a man crept into the spot of dim light. His skin was fiercely red and his whiskers infinitely black. He gazed at the four passive bundles and smiled a smile that curled his lips and showed yellow, disordered teeth. The campfire threw up two lurid arms and, quivering, expired. The voices of the trees grew hoarse and frightened. The bundles were still.

The intruder stepped softly nearer and looked at the bundles. One was shorter than the others. He regarded it for some time motionless. The hemlocks quivered nervously and the grass shook. The intruder slid to the short bundle and touched it. Then he smiled. The bundle partially unrolled itself, and the head of a little man appeared.

"Lord!" he said. He found himself looking at the grin of a ghoul condemned to torment.

"Come," croaked the ghoul.

"What?" said the little man. He began to feel his flesh slide to and fro on his bones as he looked into this smile.

"Come," croaked the ghoul.

"What?" The little man whimpered. He grew gray and could not move his legs. The ghoul lifted a three-pronged pitchfork and flashed it near the little man's throat. He saw menace on its points. He struggled heavily to his feet.

He cast his eyes upon the remaining mummy-like bundles, but the ghoul confronted his face with the spear.